
Co-Design Across Borders Special Interest Group

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Abstract

In recent years the evolving practice of co-design has continued to shift the roles of designers, researchers and the collection of partners formerly known as users. A growing community of researchers is pursuing this work 'across borders.' The greatly varied contexts of such work present distinctive challenges related to culture, power, language, etc. This SIG will convene co-design practitioners and researchers to discuss these challenges. Through attention to methods, tools and values in co-design, we will consider how co-design is traveling to new scenes around the world. We aim to form new relationships, develop themes of common interest, foster collaborations and build research infrastructure for this rapidly growing community.

Author Keywords

Co-design; human-centered design; participatory design; ICT4D; HCI4D; HCIxB; postcolonial computing.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m; H5.2; K.4.0; K.4m

Introduction

Sanders and Stappers [13] use the term co-design in a broad sense "to refer to the creativity of designers and people not trained in design working together in the design development process." In this view the evolving

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Co-Design Across Borders: A Growing Research Community

Antecedents of this SIG:

The first CHI workshop on HCI4D took place in San Jose in 2007. Subsequent workshops and panels generated a growing community of researchers interested in technology in developing regions [1], HCI for development, human-centered design for development and related areas of work. At CHI '16 the Development Consortium *HCI Across Borders* convened 70+ researchers from 20 countries [10]. Recognizing “development” as a contested term, they embraced the theme “across borders” to frame a broad interest in HCI research and practice in under-served, under-represented, and/or under-resourced contexts. The co-design across borders community is building on the momentum generated by the broader HCI across borders community.

practice of co-design draws extensively on the tradition of participatory design that emerged in Northern Europe more than forty years ago. A central feature of co-design is the transition from viewing designers as experts and potential users as informants to engaging stakeholders as partners.

While most studies in co-design have taken place in European or North American workplaces, these approaches are also being employed in a wide range of challenging cross-cultural or otherwise cross-border settings, particularly as a way of empowering “users” and encouraging potential sustainability through deeper involvement of all stakeholders. Given the pivotal influence of geographic and cultural issues for technology projects in developing regions, co-design and co-deployment have long been seen as important to success and sustainability [1]. In addition to co-design across borders, related terms for this body of work include co-design for development, community based co-design [14], participatory design [12,14] and postcolonial approaches to design [7,16,17]. Projects of co-design with autistic teens [2] or with people experiencing homelessness [18] may also be well understood as working beyond typical borders. Cross-cultural design often underscores the importance of co-design and participatory processes [1].

Work in this vein shows that great differences in language, power and cultural practice add a new layer of challenges to the traditional task of co-design. These distinctive challenges range from availability of materials [6] and translation issues to differing understandings of participation, empowerment, self and community. For but one example, a study in Namibia described a gulf between an international team of

design researchers and their local partners due to “contrasting sense of self, individuality and community, orality versus print-based literacy, and technological skills versus local situational knowledge” [16].

Given these challenges, *why co-design across borders?* Many have observed that more challenging design situations also present striking opportunities to advance the social good, humanitarian aims or empowerment. Yet this question is perhaps best understood as an overarching theme of discussion for this SIG, rather than a foregone conclusion. To offer a starting point and some structure, we will begin by discussing pragmatic methods, concrete tools and questions of value that arise in co-design across borders.

Themes of Discussion

Designing in genuine partnership with people who will routinely use the technologies we build has never been easy. For practical purposes there has been an overarching focus in co-design on the concrete ‘how’ of designing, pragmatic means of involving diverse groups of people, the importance of engaging modes other than technical or verbal, a concern with iterative evaluation etc. While acknowledging this legacy, co-designing across borders often presents distinctive challenges and there is a need for infrastructure to support this new community of research and practice.

Methods: Mock-ups, prototypes, scenarios, design games and future workshops have been central to participatory design since its early days [14]. While these methods have value in a wide range of settings, they often break down in our community’s diverse research contexts. Maunder et al [11] show that those with limited technology experience begin the process

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Attendees & Participation:

The co-design across borders community is clearly growing and would benefit from a venue for further dialog and community building. As organizers, we plan to draw attendees from our networks at our universities and institutions, as well as from related communities such as HCI4D, ICTD, and HCIxB. We will invite participants by sending out emails to authors of relevant papers, through discussion spaces in the related fields of HCI4D and ICTD, and through wider venues like CHI-Announce. We will also open the SIG to the wider HCI community by advertising via Facebook (e.g. the CHI page) and Twitter.

still intimidated by technology, and often misinterpret low-fidelity prototypes and similar unfamiliar abstractions of an already unfamiliar technology. Users from underserved communities may be particularly uncomfortable with criticizing technologies that they believe have been developed by the interviewer [2]. Molapo et al. [12] addressed such issues through an "exploration approach," giving participants ample time with new tools to explore their utility and build a vocabulary around their use before engaging in co-design activities. In such settings, skits and role-playing exercises may come to the fore, and sustaining engagement over time is often pivotal. This raises questions of how to relate formal co-design sessions (with workshops lasting a few hours) with participatory action research and iterative design ethnography.

Tools: The way we practice and teach co-design is difficult to disentangle from the concrete tools we have historically used in these activities. For example, the Routledge Handbook of Participatory Design describes *genuine* participation as being established, "when users are not just answering questions in an interview about their point of view or knowledge of a particular issue, but are asked to step up, take the pen in hand, stand in front of the large whiteboard together with fellow colleagues and designers, and participate in drawing and sketching how the work process unfolds as seen from their perspectives" [14]. This leads to distinctive challenges in contexts where sticky notes, whiteboards or sharpies are unfamiliar or even unavailable [5]. Card sorting exercises may elicit discussion of values [18] or community resources [9] among people unfamiliar with sketching, but it cannot be taken for granted that these images will reflect the people and daily realities of diverse communities around the world.

Values: In a broad sense, 'values' might refer to what people consider important in their lives [4 p.70], a desirable mode of conduct or an end-state [8]. In recent years the HCI4D community has begun to recognize that international development itself is a value-laden notion, and that implicit views of "progress" are not to be taken for granted. Postcolonial theorists in particular have drawn attention to colonial tropes that characterize particular people as in need of enlightenment, progress or development [7]. Projects of co-design across borders attempt to break with this tendency by emphasizing themes of empowerment and genuine partnership. Engaging values and negotiating them through participation are intrinsic to participatory design; simply adopting participatory methods is not sufficient for claiming to practice this approach [8]. Discussing the diverse value systems of the people we partner with and pragmatic means of taking these values seriously in our research and design work will be an important topic for this SIG.

Conclusion

A number of authors have stressed that participatory and co-design should not be defined by formulas, rules or strict definitions so much as by a core commitment to design practices in which a wider range of people take positions of influence and responsibility. Rather than reviewing the conceptual terrain or establishing definitions, our aim in this SIG is to identify themes of common interest and cultivate a community within which to pursue future collaborations. This is an important opportunity to deepen connections within the co-design across borders community and to broaden the discourse at CHI more generally.

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Key Publication Outlets:

In addition to CHI publications that speak to the theme of co-design across borders [18], several related outlets have helped this community to grow. The Participatory Design Conference, which has taken place bi-annually since 1990, has published a growing number of articles that highlight working across borders. The journal *CoDesign*, founded in 2005, has created further space for co-design publications in general and co-design across borders in particular [5,8]. Co-design topics have also found purchase at ICTD [11], DEV [12] and most recently, AfriCHI.

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